

Update on Transit Issues/Projects

December 4, 2020

- I. **Creation of a County Public Transportation Department** - Commissioners have expressed support for considering making Eagle Transit its own department, separate from the Agency on Aging. Next steps:
 - Commissioner vote to create department and Transit Director position
 - Pending Commissioner approval, hire director, most likely with assistance of executive recruiter
- II. **Rebranding to the Mountain Climber** - We are moving forward with rebranding efforts as follows:
 - Most buses will be wrapped with the new design by end of March 2021 (paid with CARES Act funds).
 - We are working on a new website with Snow Ghost (also designed wraps).
 - We will discontinue using the Eagle Transit name and logo once newly wrapped buses are on the road.
 - We need to develop an official “launch” plan and additional marketing.
 - We need to develop a sponsorship policy and plan.
- III. **Transitioning from Fixed Route to On Demand service**
 - **Current status of service:** We suspended fixed route service in Kalispell at the end of September due to COVID-related staffing issues. We immediately implemented a General Public On Demand service in Kalispell in place of the fixed route service. We are continuing with this model for time being as we explore the merits of a more permanent transition.
 - **On Demand technology:** We are in the process of researching options/vendors as updated technology is imperative to the long-term success of On Demand service, which otherwise requires a heavy investment of resources in dispatch personnel.
 - We have engaged in extensive conversations with Uber and Via and have begun discussions with a third vendor, Ecolane.
 - Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) is supportive and engaged in the process as they see microtransit/On Demand service becoming a viable option across Montana.
 - All options would include a start-up cost for software plus annual support based on the number of vehicles in service. We can pay for the upfront costs by making a capital request in March or using 5311 funds at any time. Both require a local match.
 - The On Demand technology we are considering would be an improvement over our current demand response management software even if we return to a fixed route/paratransit model.
 - If we decide to move to a more permanent transition from fixed route to On Demand, it would change the mix of vehicles we request. While we would still need some larger vehicles for commuter service, we would focus on acquiring more vans and smaller buses going forward. Smaller vehicles will be less costly to purchase and maintain and can be driven by non-CDL drivers.
 - Next steps:
 - Develop written On Demand assessment/rationale
 - Put out an RFP

IV. **Status of Commuter Service**

- We're re-introducing M-F commuter service between Kalispell and Whitefish mid-December.
- BMCA is supporting us to provide a Saturday commuter to Big Mountain for the ski season, mid-December to mid-April.
- We are exploring the feasibility of other commuter routes.

V. **CARES Act**

- MDT will continue to reimburse us for 100% of our operational costs through March 2021.
- MDT has set aside \$500,000 for us to complete a capital project. We are exploring two potential projects:
 - Purchase of the bus shelters from Chandler Communications – This option offers us the potential to gain annual operating revenue from the sale of advertising on the shelters. Currently we do not have an arrangement with Chandler that provides us with a financial interest in the shelters. The purchase is dependent on the completion of independent business valuation showing the shelters/advertising contracts are a good investment. We are hoping the valuation will be complete by mid-January.
 - If the shelter purchase does not pan out, we have the option to build another simple bus barn on south side of current facility. This option assumes Commissioner approval to use county-owned land.

VI. **Projects on Hold**

- **Conversion of fleet to propane** – Since we are considering a move away from large vehicles, this may not be the best option. Additionally, we were unable to secure a commitment for funding for the project. We plan to continue to explore clean energy alternatives, including electric.
- **Volunteer Driver Program** – We still think this could be a good option for the underserved areas of the Valley. However, given the time and resource intensiveness of the transition to On Demand, the potential separation of transit from the Agency on Aging/hiring of a new director and the uncertainty around the aging funding that would have been used to help support the effort, this project is on the back burner.